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Suspicious On a Leak

Highly placed Reagan administration officials suspect the White House itself as the source of ruinous leaks about plans for CIA covert operations against Nicaragua, reflecting corrosive mistrust at top levels of the government.

These officials hold responsible posts dealing with national security in the State and Defense departments and the CIA. They privately point out that published reports of the covert anti-Nicaragua plans have been far too detailed, refined and complete to have been given to the congressional intelligence committees and leaked from there. Only the White House could have done it, they say.

Underpinning the suspicion are long-standing concerns, particularly in the State Department, about presidential aides charged with Ronald Reagan's political health, not national security. In this view, political aides have played too large a role on global questions, sitting in on highly classified National Security Council sessions where they have no business.

White House communications chief David Gergen told us he does not know the source of the leak, but his "suspicions" place it outside the White House. Indeed, why would any White House aide even consider leaking plans of the nation's most secret operation?

Those officials who—unlike Gergen—suspect the White House answer in the political context: aides of the president have been disturbed for months by what they hear from Richard Wirthlin, the president's pollster. His polls show the Central America issue building fast, with overwhelming opposition to intervention by U.S. troops and apprehension over rising U.S. aid.

The White House aides may sense disaster ahead for the president on grounds that the first covert operations plan would lead inevitably to a second and a third, sucking the United States closer to outright intervention. Thus, the motive for the unproved leak might have been to set off a public reaction that would abort the plan.

That the president might get too tough fighting the spread of Marxism through vulnerable Central American states and thereby suffer politically has been a White House worry ever since Reagan took office. One year ago, Secretary of State Alexander Haig was quietly reprimanded for too much talk about the Caribbean Basin crisis; it was detracting from the president's domestic economic battles, the State Department was told.

The situation in Central America has deteriorated since then. Nevertheless, the president, known as the great communicator, has done little to persuade American citizens that Marxist inroads threaten U.S. security.

This presidential reticence, so uncharacteristic of Ronald Reagan, seems the result of a steady stream of warnings from White House politicians to keep off the firing line and thereby avoid the trigger-happy label of 1980 campaign vintage.

Thus, White House political aides removed all tough talk from early drafts of Reagan's Feb. 24 Caribbean Basin speech. In this instance, the president ultimately followed contrary advice from National Security Adviser William P. Clark and the State Department: a few hard-line paragraphs were put into the speech.

By and large, however, it is Al Haig—whose stature does not approach that of the president—carrying the burden of persuading American voters that there is truly danger to this nation in Central American communism.

Although White House complicity in the leaks cannot be proved and certainly is not admitted, private comments by presidential aides are disquieting. If the leak did come from the White House, one aide told us, its purpose might have been to frighten Nicaragua into changing its ways.

Whatever the reason, suspicion that the White House undermined its own secret plan to turn the tide in Central America is creating a new crisis between the political and the national security worlds swirling around Ronald Reagan. This new crisis cries out for a stronger, more personal presidential hand, tough enough to keep domestic politics and its overzealous practitioners out of national